

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 CAIRO 23008 01 OF 03 271826Z
ACTION H-03

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FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3512
INFO AMCONSUL ALEXANDRIA
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 23008

CODEL HOLTZMAN

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: OREP (HOLTZMAN, ELIZABETH) EG US
SUBJECT: CODEL HOLTZMAN REQUEST FOR EGYPTIAN TORAH
- SCROLLS

SUMMARY. REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN ASKED PRESIDENT SADAT FOR HIS ASSISTANCE IN OBTAINING SEVERAL HISTORIC TORAHS, FORMERLY USED IN NO LONGER ACTIVE CAIRO SYNAGOGUES, FOR HER EGYPTIAN-JEWISH CONSTITUENTS. PRESIDENT GAVE HIS APPROVAL FOR PROJECT. AMBASSADOR AND REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN PURSUED SUBJECT WITH MIN CULTURE AL-SAWI, WHO RAISED SOME LEGAL QUESTIONS AND NOTED DIFFICULTY IN LOCATING SCROLLS. NEVERTHELESS, MINISTER INDICATED SOME MEANS WOULD BE FOUND, EITHER ON LOAN OR GRANT BASIS, TO MAKE TORAHS AVAILABLE TO REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN'S CONSTITUENTS. PRESIDENT OF CAIRO'S DWINDLING JEWISH COMMUNITY WAS LESS HOPEFUL. HE STATED COMMUNITY MOST RELUCTANT TO PART WITH HISTORIC TORAHS SINCE IT ANTICIPATES RETURN LARGE NUMBER OF JEWS. HE NOTED THIRTY TO FORTY SCROLLS WERE SEIZED BY EGYPTIAN CUSTOMS SEVERAL YEARS AGO DURING ATTEMPT TO SMUGGLE THEM OUT OF COUNTRY. PRESIDENT OF COMMUNITY AGREED TO PRESENT REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN'S REQUEST TO COMMUNITY COUNCIL BUT REFUSED TO PREDICT OUTCOME.
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PAGE 02 CAIRO 23008 01 OF 03 271826Z

TWO COURSES OF ACTION APPEAR POSSIBLE. FIRST, CAIRO JEWISH COMMUNITY MIGHT GIVE OR LEND SEVERAL SCROLLS TO EGYPTIAN-JEWISH COMMUNITY IN BROOKLYN. THIS COULD BE FACILITATED BY ESTABLISHING DIRECT CONTACT BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND BROOKLYN AND CAIRO'S JEWISH LEADERS. SECOND, WE COULD SEEK TO OBTAIN MIN CULTURE'S INTERCEPTION WITH EGYPTIAN CUSTOMS TO OBTAIN SEVERAL OF TORAHS IN POSSES-

SION CUSTOMS AUTHORITIES. END SUMMARY.

1. DURING RECENT VISIT TO EGYPT, REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN TOLD AMBASSADOR THAT SHE HAD BEEN APPROACHED BY EGYPTIAN-JEWISH CONSTITUENTS IN HER DISTRICT FOR ASSISTANCE IN OBTAINING SOME EGYPTIAN TORAH SCROLLS FOR NEW SYNAGOGUE THAT THE EGYPTIAN-JEWISH COMMUNITY IS BUILDING IN BROOKLYN. REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN ASKED WHETHER SHE MIGHT RAISE THIS SUBJECT DURING HER DECEMBER 21 MEETING WITH PRESIDENT SADAT. AMBASSADOR SAID HE SAW NO OBJECTION TO DOING SO AND THAT THIS MIGHT BE AN ESPECIALLY PROPITIOUS TIME FOR SUCH A REQUEST. HE CAUTIONED, HOWEVER, THAT THERE IS SOME GOE SENSITIVITY ON THIS MATTER. THE EGYPTIANS REGARD THE HISTORIC SCROLLS AS "NATIONAL TREASURES" AND HAVE TURNED DOWN SEVERAL PREVIOUS REQUESTS FROM VISITING AMERICAN AND OTHER RABBIS TO SEND THEM TO THE UNITED STATES. IN FACT, EMBASSY HAS ON NUMBER OF OCCASIONS IN THE PAST BEEN ASKED BY VISITING AMERICAN RABBIS TO SEND THEM OUT THROUGH THE DIPLOMATIC POUCH. WE HAVE CONSISTENTLY HAD TO DECLINE TO DO SO, SINCE WITHOUT GOE PERMISSION TO EXPORT THESE DOCUMENTS, SUCH ACTION WOULD IN EFFECT BE AN ABUSE OF THE DIPLOMATIC POUCH AND BE VIEWED AS SMUGGLING. SHOULD GOE APPROVE SENDING OUT SUCH SCROLLS, EMBASSY WOULD, OF COURSE, BE PLEASED TO BE OF ALL POSSIBLE ASSISTANCE IN FINDING THE BEST AND SAFEST MEANS TO DO SO. REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN SAID SHE UNDERSTOOD.

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 CAIRO 23008 01 OF 03 271826Z

2. IN MEETING WITH SADAT, REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN TOLD THE PRESIDENT ABOUT HER EGYPTIAN-JEWISH CONSTITUENTS' REQUEST. SHE NOTED THAT THEY ARE VERY SUPPORTIVE OF SADAT'S PEACE INITIATIVES AND HAVE HELD A PRAYER SERVICE ON HIS BEHALF. THEY HAD ALSO SENT HIM A MESSAGE OF SUPPORT. THEY ARE BUILDING A NEW SYNAGOGUE IN BROOKLYN WITH SAME NAME AS THEIR FORMER SYNAGOGUE IN CAIRO. THEY WOULD APPRECIATE HAVING FOR THEIR NEW HOUSE OF WORSHIP SOME TORAH SCROLLS FROM THEIR ERSTWHILE CAIRO SYNAGOGUES THAT ARE NO LONGER IN USE. REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN POINTED OUT THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT TO COMMUNITY BECAUSE OF THEIR DEEP TIES TO EGYPT. RECEIPT OF SCROLLS WOULD HAVE SOME HISTORIC, SYMBOLIC AND RELIGIOUS VALUE AND WOULD BE DEEPLY APPRECIATED.

3. SADAT REPLIED THAT LORD SIGEL OF GREAT BRITAIN HAD MADE SIMILAR REQUEST FOR RELIGIOUS SCROLL SIGNIFICANT TO HIS FAMILY. HE THOUGHT IT WAS IN ALEXANDRIA. HE HAD PROMISED ONE TO LORD SIGEL, WHICH HE THOUGHT WOULD BE PUT IN OXFORD LIBRARY. REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN'S EGYPTIAN-JEWISH COMMUNITY COULD HAVE "WHATEVER THEY LIKE." HE SUGGESTED MATTER BE DISCUSSED WITH MIN CULTURE ABDEL

MONEIM AL-SAWI TO WORK OUT DETAILS. AL-SAWI COULD BE TOLD THAT THE PROJECT HAS PRESIDENT'S APPROVAL.

4. TO PIN DOWN SADAT'S PROMISE, AMBASSADOR AND REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN MET SAME DAY WITH MINISTER AL-SAWI IN CAIRO. AMBASSADOR AND MRS. HOLTZMAN GAVE MINISTER BACKGROUND ABOUT REQUEST, TOLD HIM OF SADAT'S APPROVAL, AND ASKED WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO OBTAIN THE SCROLLS. AL-SAWI RECALLED THAT, IN HIS FORMER CAPACITY AS DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 01 CAIRO 23008 02 OF 03 271835Z
ACTION H-03

INFO OCT-01 AID-01 SS-07 NEA-07 NSC-06 ISO-00 /025 W
-----017560 271837Z /44

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FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO
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AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 03 CAIRO 23008

CODEL HOLTZMAN

MINISTRY OF CULTURE, HE HAD BEEN INTERESTED IN PROTECTING HISTORIC JEWISH DOCUMENTS AND HAD INSTRUCTED STAFF TO CATALOG THESE AND PROVIDE FOR THEIR SAFE-KEEPING. ON HIS RETURN TO THE MINISTRY, HE HAD ASKED ABOUT THESE DOCUMENTS, BUT HAD UP TO NOW BEEN UNABLE TO ASCERTAIN THEIR WHEREABOUTS. NOR COULD THE CATALOG BE LOCATED. AL-SAWI THOUGHT MOST OF THE TORAH SCROLLS WERE LOCATED IN ALEXANDRIA. REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN TOLD THE MINISTER THAT HER CONSTITUENTS CAME FROM CAIRO AND, FOR SENTIMENTAL AS WELL AS HISTORIC REASONS, WERE ANXIOUS TO HAVE SOME OF THE TORAH SCROLLS USED IN THE CAIRO SYNAGOGUES.

5. AL-SAWI ALSO NOTED THAT THERE IS AN EGYPTIAN LAW PROHIBITING THE EXPORT OF DOCUMENTS WHICH ARE REGARDED AS "NATIONAL TREASURES". IF THE SCROLLS ARE FOUND, THE MATTER MIGHT ALSO HAVE TO BE DISCUSSED WITH THE APPROPRIATE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE. HE THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE, HOWEVER, IF THE DOCUMENTS CANNOT BE PERMANENTLY TRANSFERRED BECAUSE OF EGYPTIAN LEGISLATION, TO PROVIDE THEM ON A LOAN BASIS. REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN

SAID THIS WAS AGREEABLE AND EXPRESSED HER APPRECIATION.
AL-SAWI UNDERTOOK TO LOOK INTO THE MATTER AND SAID HE
NEEDED ABOUT TWO WEEKS TIME TO DO SO. HE WOULD BE IN
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 CAIRO 23008 02 OF 03 271835Z

TOUCH WITH THE AMBASSADOR SOON AS HE HAD SOME MORE DEFINI-
TIVE INFORMATION.

6. SUBSEQUENT TO THIS MEETING, REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN
AND EMBOFF MET WITH FELIX IZKAKI, THE PRESIDENT OF CAIRO'S
SMALL JEWISH COMMUNITY AND MENTIONED REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZ-
MAN'S INTEREST TO HIM. IZKAKI REPORTED THE CAIRO JEWISH
COMMUNITY HAS IN ITS POSSESSION APPROXIMATELY THREE HUN-
DRED HISTORIC TORAHS. HE SAID AN ADDITIONAL THIRTY-FORTY
HAD BEEN INTERCEPTED BY EGYPTIAN CUSTOMS FOLLOWING AN
ATTEMPT TO SMUGGLE THEM OUT OF COUNTRY THREE OR FOUR YEARS
AGO. (HE DID NOT IDENTIFY WHO HAD TRIED TO SMUGGLE THEM
OUT.) SINCE THEN COMMUNITY HAS BEEN TRYING, THUS FAR
UNSUCCESSFULLY, TO REGAIN POSSESSION OF THESE TORAHS.

7. IZKAKI SAID LOCAL JEWISH COMMUNITY HAS RECEIVED
NUMEROUS REQUESTS FROM JEWISH SCHOLARS AROUND THE WORLD
FOR THESE HISTORIC SCROLLS AND SHOWED A NUMBER OF LETTERS
TO PROVE THIS. IN ONE CASE, MRS. SADAT HAD HERSELF SOUGHT
TO INTERCEDE IN BEHALF OF SOME INDIVIDUAL SEEKING EGYPTIAN
TORAHS, BUT HAD BEEN TOLD THE JEWISH COMMUNITY WOULD NOT
GIVE THEM UP. IZKAKI COMMENTED THAT, FOLLOWING SADAT'S
PEACE INITIATIVES, THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IS EVEN MORE RE-
LUCTANT TO AGREE TO LET THESE DOCUMENTS LEAVE THE COUNTRY,
SINCE IT ANTICIPATES LARGE NUMBER OF EGYPTIAN JEWS WILL
RETURN TO EGYPT AND TORAHS WILL BE NEEDED. HE APPEARED
UNMOVED BY REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN'S ARGUMENT THAT HER RE-
QUEST IS DIFFERENT FROM SCHOLARLY REQUESTS, SINCE IT
DIRECTLY INVOLVES EGYPTIAN JEWS SEEKING TO MAINTAIN RELI-
GIOUS LINKS TO THEIR HOMELAND AND THEIR ORIGINAL COMMUNITY.
IZKAKI NEVERTHELESS AGREED PRESENT HER REQUEST TO JEWISH
COMMUNITY COUNCIL, IF REQUEST IS PUT IN WRITING, BUT WOULD
NOT PREDICT OUTCOME. REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN DRAFTED
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 CAIRO 23008 02 OF 03 271835Z

LETTER TO THIS EFFECT BEFORE DEPARTING. LETTER HAS BEEN
FORWARDED TO IZKAKI.

8. COMMENT: AMBASSADOR TOLD REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN WE
WILL SEEK TO FOLLOW UP ON HER REQUEST. THERE WOULD APPEAR
TO BE TWO POSSIBILITIES:

(A) FIRST, AND PRESUMABLY SIMPLEST, WOULD BE IF CAIRO JEWISH COMMUNITY AGREED TO GIVE OR LEND SEVERAL SCROLLS TO THE EGYPTIAN-JEWISH COMMUNITY AT BROOKLYN AND MIN CULTURE'S CONSENT IS OBTAINED TO SEND THEM. IZKAKI'S ATTITUDE TO DATE GAVE LITTLE CAUSE FOR OPTIMISM THAT JEWISH COMMUNITY WILL BE WILLING TO DO SO, BUT CONCEIVABLY SOME DIRECT CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN EGYPTIAN-JEWISH COMMUNITY IN BROOKLYN AND FELIX IZKAKI MIGHT ENABLE SOME ARRANGEMENT TO BE WORKED OUT. THEORETICALLY, ONE MIGHT CONSIDER SUGGESTING GOE URGE LOCAL JEWISH COMMUNITY TO BE MORE RESPONSIVE, BUT MRS. SADAT'S LACK OF SUCCESS ON THIS SCORE IS INSTRUCTIVE. WE DOUBT THAT GOE WOULD STRONGLY PRESS JEWISH COMMUNITY. INSTEAD, IT WOULD LEAVE DECISION FOR COMMUNITY TO MAKE.

(B) A SECOND POSSIBILITY IS TO SEEK TO OBTAIN AL-SAWI'S INTERCESSION WITH EGYPTIAN CUSTOMS TO MAKE AVAILABLE SEVERAL OF THE TORAH SCROLLS REPORTEDLY BEING HELD BY CUSTOMS AND, AGAIN ON A GRANT OR LOAN BASIS, SEND THEM TO REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN FOR THE EGYPTIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY IN BROOKLYN. IT IS UNCLEAR WHETHER THESE THIRTY-FORTY TORAH SCROLLS HAVE BEEN CONFISCATED BY GOE BECAUSE OF ATTEMPT SMUGGLE THEM OUT. IF SO, GOE MIGHT CONSIDER THAT IT IS

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 01 CAIRO 23008 03 OF 03 271837Z
ACTION H-03

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 03 OF 03 CAIRO 23008

CODEL HOLTZMAN

AUTHORIZED GIVE OR LEND THEM, PRESUMABLY WITH PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY APPROVAL. CLEARLY, HOWEVER, JEWISH COMMUNITY IN CAIRO STILL CONSIDERS IT HAS A CLAIM TO THESE TORAH SCROLLS AND MIGHT VERY WELL OBJECT. IT MIGHT, NEVERTHELESS, BE EASIER FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY IN CAIRO TO AGREE TO MAKING

AVAILABLE TWO OR THREE SCROLLS FROM THOSE REPORTEDLY HELD BY CUSTOMS SINCE THEY HAVE FOR SOME YEARS NOT BEEN IN REGULAR USE BY JEWISH COMMUNITY IN ITS WORSHIP SERVICES.

9. WE PLAN TO INFORM AL-SAWI OF THE REPORT THAT THE EGYPTIAN CUSTOMS MAY BE HOLDING THIRTY-FORTY SUCH TORAH SCROLLS AND WILL ASK WHETHER SEVERAL OF THESE MIGHT NOT BE MADE AVAILABLE AS THE QUICKEST WAY TO MEET PRESIDENT SADAT'S COMMITMENT. IN ANY CASE, WE BELIEVE UPON FURTHER REFLECTION, THAT IT MIGHT BE SUGGESTED TO REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN THAT SHE ADVISE THE HEAD OF THE EGYPTIAN-JEWISH COMMUNITY IN BROOKLYN TO ESTABLISH DIRECT CONTACT WITH MR. IZKAKI ABOUT THE MATTERS. EILTS

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